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The Quest for a Prime Mover. A Critique of Deirdre McCloskey's Theory of Change

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Abstract

Within a framework of history of political thought, this essay examines the original, albeit questionable, account furthered by Chicago economist Deirdre McCloskey. First, I will present an intellectual profile of the author in order to provide a broader perspective on her thoughts about ethics, politics and economics, and to show how her position in these areas intertwines with the main thesis expressed in the *Bourgeois* trilogy. Secondly, I will propose, on the basis of an alternative reading of historical materialism, that Marx's theory of change is more complex than she admits. Finally, I will show the problematic aspects of McCloskey's theory of historical change. My main point is that McCloskey's account is motivated by her polemic intent against Marxism – as her intellectual background shows – and because of that she ignores alternative readings of historical materialism. As a consequence, her theory of historical change presents a few flaws. In fact, the “revolution of ideas” which McCloskey indicates as a direct cause of the Industrial Revolution, may appear as an attempt to replace the accumulation theory of the Marxist tradition with another all-purpose label. It is risky to rely on a theory that seeks a single cause for historical change, because it entails a linear conception of history rather than a more complex and comprehensive one. In short, I maintain that strict causal monism cannot explain the evolution of society.

Keywords: the Industrial Revolution, Deirdre McCloskey, classical liberalism, bourgeoisie, theory of change.

Introduction

In the historiography of the Western world, especially in the debates about industrialization and economic growth in modern Europe, the Industrial

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Revolution has been examined, discussed, contested and celebrated to the point where it has achieved the role of a “historiographical battlefield”. The result is that this pivotal phase of unprecedented technological change, which is conventionally dated between 1760 and 1820, has become controversial not just as a phenomenon *per se*, but also as a historiographical testing ground due to the different ways in which various scholars, appealing to several theoretical approaches, have dealt with this topic. First of all, what the Industrial Revolution is ultimately about is a question still open to debate. Because of the emphasis on abrupt discontinuity that it seems to recall, the term “revolution” itself seems to be inadequate since the rate of technological, social and political change was revolutionary in only a few areas of the economy, limited to Central and Northern Europe, and especially Britain. In any case, change was significantly more gradual compared to the standards of political revolutions. Moreover, despite historians’ multiple perspectives, concerns and definitions, one of the most debated issues lies in the difficulty to identify a “prime mover” of such an unprecedented transformation: what was the driving force of the social and political change which took place in Europe after the Industrial Revolution? While some historians tend to emphasize and isolate its essential economic dimension, others take a broader view, maintaining that it involved the transformation of society, politics and ideas as well as the economy. A controversy that encompasses most debates is the following: while those who refer to Marx’s historical materialism believe that the origins of historical change are to be found in a shift in economic conditions, those who share the views of Max Weber, who rejected Marx’s materialistic approach in *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), maintain that the role of culture and ideas in shaping the change should not be overlooked.² It is important to state that the line of thought that originated from these two approaches, which have been considered as diametrically opposite, has contributed to their polarization more than the original founders themselves, as it will become clear later in this essay.

The fact that the Industrial Revolution has become an almost exclusive territory for economic historians, who are mainly concerned with technological change and economic growth, is nonetheless revealing of the mainstream approach in investigating historical change. New Economic History, also known as “Cliometrics”, after the name of Clio, the Greek muse of history, consists in the systematic application of econometrics to historical studies. With their quantitative approach to economic history and their focus on mathematical and statistical tools, scholars who further this perspective have stressed the

² As he clarifies in the very last lines of the *Protestant Ethic*, Weber was fully aware that a “spiritual” or idealistic interpretation of history is equally dissatisfying as a materialistic one, since both are insufficient to fully describe historical change. See Max Weber, *L’etica protestante e lo spirito del capitalismo*, (A. M. Marietti trans.), Milano, BUR, 2016, p. 242.

importance of the specific economic dimension of historical events. Born as a discipline in the 1960s, it has played an important role in the beginning of Deirdre McCloskey's academic career, whose original perspective will be the focus of this study. Before she published *The Rhetoric of Economics* in 1983, where she distanced herself from mainstream economists, who – she claimed – seem to have excessive faith in the scientific objectivity of their own analyses, she had a solid quantitative background and was a renowned econometrics expert.³ However, in her *Bourgeois* trilogy, which was published between 2007 and 2016, McCloskey, provided her past as a quantitative methodologist, not only does not refer once to hard numbers, but the very basis of her arguments relies solely on her encyclopaedic literary knowledge – adding a few pop culture references every now and then. Surely, her unorthodox methodological hallmark, combined with her humanistic account of the Industrial Revolution, deserves some consideration: arguing against historical materialism, and pushing the Weberian take even further, she stresses the social, cultural and political aspects of discontinuity of the Industrial Revolution, which she claims to have favoured individual enterprise and paved the way for liberal democracy. She especially focuses on the role of the bourgeoisie, emphasising those virtues of dedication, responsibility and honesty which are consistent features of businessmen in every day and age, and which, thanks to the liberal ideas publicized by economists and philosophers during the Enlightenment, produced the pivotal event she indicates as the “Great Enrichment”. The “Great Enrichment” happened at the end of 19th century when a general increase in incomes seemingly generated a widespread betterment of the quality of life, which in the long term benefited even the working masses. McCloskey's position draws on an original combination of classical liberalism, feminist virtue ethics and right-wing libertarianism, with some conservative elements: her praise of the bourgeoisie casts a new light on a social class which, especially among leftist intellectuals, has become a synonym for greed and cowardice. However, as I will show at the end of this study, she furthers a problematic perspective on social and political change.

My main point is that McCloskey's account is motivated by her polemic premises against Marxism – as her intellectual background shows – and because of that she ignores alternative readings of historical materialism. As a consequence, her theory of historical change presents a few flaws. In this essay, I hope to show the dangers of seeking a prime mover of historical change, and why a complex and multi-causal perspective on pivotal historical events is preferable to seeking a single cause which started it all. In order to show her fallacies, in this essay I will provide a broader perspective on her thoughts in

³ As it is evident in Donald McCloskey, “The Industrial Revolution, 1780-1860: A Survey”, *The Economic History of Britain, 1700-Present*, vol. 1, 1981, pp. 103-127.

ethics, politics and economics, as to show how her position in these areas motivate her polemic intent towards Marxism. Secondly, I will propose, on the basis of an alternative reading of historical materialism, that Marx's theory of change, which she criticizes, is more complex than she admits. Finally, I will show the problematic aspects of McCloskey's theory of historical change, which stem from her opposition towards a strict interpretation of historical materialism.

As a disclaimer before I delve into the topic, it should be noted that this cannot be considered as a strictly historiographical paper. What I will discuss here is not merely *what* is the Industrial Revolution and what is it about. Instead, within a framework of history of political thought, and, more broadly, of history of ideas, I will consider how a specific conceptualization of the Industrial Revolution can contribute to the general theoretical discussion about historical change. To clarify, I am convinced that McCloskey's views as expressed in her *Bourgeois* trilogy constitute an original contribution to the general debate and are therefore worth taking into consideration, because of her unique approach and the sources she draws her arguments from. However, her account is also worth analysing because of its fallacies. In the remaining of the article, I intend to shed light on the risks of determinism and casual monism within a broader epistemological perspective on social and political change, on the basis of the fact that these fallacies would deprive any conceptualization of historical change of its complexity.

An Intellectual Profile: Politics, Ethics, Economics

Professor of Economics, History, English Literature and Communication at the University of Illinois, Chicago,⁴ Deirdre McCloskey's figure is certainly unique. Her personality combines a transgender identity, an Episcopalian faith and a right-wing libertarian political ideology. A strong supporter of the "night-watcher State" theory, her strenuous defence of bourgeois virtues would seem provocative to the average mainstream intellectual, and her appeal in favour of the rehabilitation of morality in economics presents interesting aspects which fruitfully contribute to contemporary debate.

As previously mentioned, her views in politics and economics draw on multiple sources, and to call her merely a neo-conservative would be rather dismissive. The major contribution to her political stance can be identified in

⁴ It should be noted that, while in her formative years McCloskey had attended Harvard University, in 1968 she became Assistant Professor at University of Chicago (it should be noted that its school of Economics is widely known to be a fortress of neoliberalism). After a teaching period at Erasmus Universiteit in Rotterdam, she came back to Chicago, and she now teaches at the University of Illinois, in the aforementioned departments.

classical liberalism, but her admiration for this line of thought seems to be torn between the approval of Adam Smith's work in moral philosophy and the critique of Malthus and Ricardo's anthropological stance on economic agents. The *homo oeconomicus*, who was the main subject in classical economics analyses and was guided by – as she likes to say – *Prudence Only*, is really just a fictional character: in fact, it would be restrictive to assume pure rationality as the only valid criterion in moral life.⁵ In order to mitigate the hedonistic and utilitarian perspective derived by the rational choice theory, McCloskey often appeals to a moral theory inspired by Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), which is not limited to prudence, but also incorporates love and justice, faith and hope.⁶ An appeal for love, which entails asymmetry and vulnerability, is certainly unheard of from an advocate of neoliberalism and free market who has been deeply influenced by Chicago school economists and therefore believes in the fundamental equality and freedom of all individuals. In the light of the relevance of morality in McCloskey's theory, it is safe to say that her main contribution lies in her "feminist" critique of utilitarianism, which, albeit not innovative in its polemic intent, is certainly carried out with originality as it bears an interesting gendered nuance. The author's take is in fact that the bourgeoisie marked a turning point in history thanks to its *virtue ethics*, which she claims to be deeply rooted into Christian ethics as well. It is worth saying that bourgeois virtue ethics was not revolutionary in itself, and the bourgeoisie did not suddenly become more virtuous: it was the social and political approval for the bourgeois way of life that caused the "Great Enrichment", more specifically, it was liberal ideas which favoured innovation then, and would favour innovation now, if they had the same widespread approval as in the 18th century. According to McCloskey, it is time to rehabilitate liberalism – in a version as up-to-date as Adam Smith's – in order to restore the leading power of the middle class in the economy. On one hand, prudence, justice, courage and temperance, and hope, faith and love on the other, make up the set of values which regulates the moral life of the bourgeois man and – interestingly enough – the bourgeois woman. Surely, McCloskey's portrayal of the bourgeoisie is very different than the picture, usually associated to greed, hypocrisy or narrow-mindedness, painted by leftist intellectuals – or, as she prefers, the *clerisy* – who

⁵ "Capitalism is not a matter of Prudence Only. It has followed Prudence Only over its short history as the ruling ideology of our economies. Prudence Only is not how it actually works. Property is not theft – yet neither is property everything there is. Ruthless self-interest is not the life of capitalists – yet neither is every capitalist ethical. Bourgeois life has not in practice, I claim, excluded the other virtues. In fact, it has often nourished them". Deirdre McCloskey, *The Bourgeois Virtues, Ethics for an Age of Commerce*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007, p. 8.

⁶ Deirdre McCloskey, *The Bourgeois Virtues ... cit.*, p. 407; Adam Smith's role in McCloskey's moral theory is clarified for example in Deirdre McCloskey, *The Bourgeois Virtues ... cit.*, p. 118.

constitute the intended audience of the *Bourgeois* trilogy. That is why the author perseveres in trying to persuade her readers that capitalism – or, as she prefers, *trade-tested betterment* – makes us better men and women. She does so both by outlining the human achievements that capitalist economies have made possible in history, and by outlining a version of virtue ethics which is supposed to summarize the qualities of personal behaviour that have allowed capitalism to succeed. While Bentham’s utilitarianism and Kant’s deontological theory emphasize universal standards and impartiality in moral action, McCloskey’s theory focuses on the importance of responsibility: she appeals to different sources, besides Smith’s moral theory, to back up her view. From McIntyre communitarianism to a specific version of Aristotle as furthered by female analytic moral philosophers (like Elizabeth Anscombe or Philippa Foot), McCloskey aims to distance herself from a “masculine” view of virtue, based on the principle of competition for profit, towards a perspective based on “cooperation” which challenges the classical liberal tradition. However, her criticism towards utilitarian and deontological ethics does not mean that her idea of justice can be qualified as *social* justice, as it usually is in the work of many care ethics scholars like Carol Gilligan or Virginia Held, or care economists like Nancy Folbre, whose theories she nonetheless considers in her works. The following is her take on social justice:

“[...] a this-world egalitarianism was not imagined until Rousseau and especially Adam Smith. Equality of souls did not imply anything like equality of conditions in this life. On the contrary, fallen man must take up his burden as God’s test. The poor are to be relieved because charity is a Christian duty and a Jewish *mitzvah*, not because the poor servant is entitled to a comfortable life.”⁷

Therefore, as it emerges from this passage, McCloskey’s version of “care ethics” does not focus on the recognition of vulnerability, which would not be compatible with her premises of freedom and equality for all individuals. Against the social liberal model, which generally entails reducing material inequalities between individuals via the redistribution of incomes to grant equal access to basic amenities, McCloskey furthers a classic liberal model, with some conservative nuances, as the justification for the maintenance of the *status quo* of inequality seems to be rooted – in a rather unsatisfactory way – in religious faith. On a strictly philosophical side, her moral theory seems to revolve around a concept of “human nature” as a source of norms of conduct necessary to live a good life, if one can overcome the basic Christian assumption that “we are all capable of sin and get into it daily”.⁸ And while those natural human qualities will affect the outcome of competition in the

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 288.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 284.

public arena – as far as both economy and politics are concerned –, they should not prevent anyone from having the chance to compete at all.

“A little farmers’ market opens before 6:00 am on a summer Saturday at Polk and Dearborn in Chicago. As a woman walking her dog passes the earliest dealer setting up his stall, the woman and the dealer exchange pleasantries about the early bird and the worm. The two people here are enacting a script of citizenly courtesies and of encouragement for prudence and enterprise and good relations between seller and buyer. Some hours later the woman feels impelled to buy \$1.50 worth of tomatoes from him. But that’s not the point. The market was an occasion for virtue, an expression of solidarity across gender, social class, ethnicity.”⁹

Her moral theory, despite appealing to care ethics, has little to do with social justice. In fact, it does not stem from acknowledging the vulnerability of others, quite the opposite: as it emerges from this portrait she depicts, it seems to be more about a form of courteous politeness, a way to pay homage to and cultivate the fundamental equality among all individuals. In another passage, she further elaborates on the same topic:

“We want as humans to honor the sacred. True, what is sacred changes from time to time. Raising up the poor has become, for example, a sacred duty in the modern, liberal world, since about the time when the ethic of taking up your cross began to fade. My left-wing friends are, I believe, mistaken to think that the state is a sweet and good instrument to raise up the poor. On the other hand, some of my conservative and libertarian friends are equally mistaken to believe that trading suffices. At a conference of many hundreds of libertarians in Barbados a while ago, I said to a man I had not formerly met, by way of expressing in casual conversation a sacred duty we libertarians of course all acknowledged, ‘We must help the poor’. He instantly shot back – it was like being punched in the stomach – ‘Only if they help me’. His libertarianism was fatherly. But there is a motherly version available, in which children are instructed to be ethical human beings in both the trading and nontrading part of their lives.”¹⁰

Here it becomes clear how important gendered ethics are for her political position, but only in the sense of helping to achieve an equality of opportunity for all people – especially since at some point in history it has become a “sacred duty” to help those who cannot “take up their burden as God’s test” on their own. In this framework, social justice and any form of welfare cannot be contemplated, as any institutional intervention would be detrimental if it were not perpetrated with the sole intent of granting equal opportunity (instead of equal access) to every individual. After stating that “the ongoing danger to freedom [...] is from the powers of the modern state”,¹¹ she adds:

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

¹⁰ Deirdre McCloskey, *Bourgeois Equality. How Ideas, not Capital or Institutions, Enriched the World*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2016, p. 559.

¹¹ Deirdre McCloskey, *Bourgeois Virtues ... cit.*, p. 35.

“I am puzzled when my friends on the right preach freedom for the owner of an assault weapon loaded with dum-dum shells hung on a rack in his Hummer, but then preach, too, intrusions by the government into that same man’s sexual practices or his taste in recreational drugs or the care of his brain-damaged wife. But I am also puzzled when my friends on the left preach still more power for a government that has in its time shot Kentucky strikers and electrocuted Italian anarchists and jailed Muslim radicals without trial.”¹²

Her views are those of a typical right-wing libertarian who conceives state intervention as a hurdle to *laissez-faire* capitalism¹³ – in fact, in terms of politics, her theory presents no substantial additions to Nozick’s idea of a “night-watchman state” as expressed in *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (1974). To summarize, McCloskey’s position seems to be an example of classical liberalism in its purest, original sense¹⁴ of the liberation of man from the stifling societal constraints of the *ancien régime*, the appeal in favour of personal initiative and the defence of property rights – a profile which is illustrative of the American libertarian experience.¹⁵ After all, this is a standard argument in favour of *laissez-faire*: any intervention who would limit individual enterprise with the intent of achieving equal conditions would hinder technological progress and intellectual discoveries, which justifies her interest in the Industrial Revolution, and the scientific breakthrough that comes with it.

The Bourgeois trilogy, which will be the focus of this study, should be read, by the author’s own definition, as “an *apologia* in the theological sense of giving reasons, with room for doubt, directed to non-believers.”¹⁶ The three volumes are respectively titled *The Bourgeois Virtues* (2007), *Bourgeois Dignity* (2010) and *Bourgeois Equality* (2016), and their intent as a whole is to find an answer to the age-old question: have our riches corrupted us?

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 49.

¹³ However, not once McCloskey calls herself an anarcho-capitalist, or references the work of Murray Rothbard, who is universally considered as the leading figure of this line of thought – despite the numerous comparisons that can be drawn between the two (such as the polemic against Keynes, and the criticism towards Bentham’s utilitarianism, see for example Murray Rothbard, *Classical Economics: An Austrian Perspective on the History of Economic Thought*, vol. II, Ludwig Von Mises Institute, Auburn, Alabama 2006, ch. 2, 1st ed. 1995). It can be argued that one of the reasons behind it might be that anarcho-capitalist individualism is not compatible with McCloskey’s relational ethics.

¹⁴ As she writes in *Bourgeois Dignity. Why Economics Can’t Explain the Modern World*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, no. 3, 2010, p. 451, “I will use the word *liberal* throughout not in its confused and twentieth-century American sense (“left-wing”) but in its older and still European sense of “devoted to liberty, especially political and economic liberty”. It is part of my argument that the American sense can be corrosive of true liberalism. (But so can neoconservatism)”.

¹⁵ On the topic, see the introduction to Pietro Adamo, *L’anarchismo americano nel Novecento. Da Emma Goldman ai Black Bloc*, Franco Angeli, Milano 2016.

¹⁶ Deirdre McCloskey, *Bourgeois Virtues ... cit.*, p. 1.

McCloskey's answer, as it should be clear at this point, is radically negative. However, it is in the enquiry for the historical causes of the "Great Enrichment" where the flawed part of her thesis lies. In fact, the scholars who refer to Marx's historical materialism – which are McCloskey's explicit targets – believe that the origins of the "Great Enrichment" are to be found in the exploitation of the working class and thus in the extraction of surplus value from underpaid labour. Against this perspective and in line with the classical liberal tradition, McCloskey maintains that the "Great Enrichment" started from capital reinvestments which became productive only when a shift in culture and ideas occurred. She argues that the rise of the bourgeoisie, rather than stemming from some kind of original accumulation of the capital, as the Marxist tradition would maintain, was caused by a change of mindset, when the moral values surrounding commercial success (i.e. honesty, prudence, dedication, etc.) started to gain public recognition. In short, the rise of the bourgeoisie is not rooted in accumulation of the capital or in state intervention, it was rather a "revolution of ideas", a shift in mindsets, that laid the basis for technological innovation and social mobility. McCloskey's emphasis on extra-economic factors – namely social, cultural and political aspects of the Industrial Revolution – adds value to the trilogy, making it something more than merely the work of an economics historian: her wide perspective of history of ideas places her in the same canon of historical studies¹⁷ as Joel Mokyr, who, in *A Culture of Growth* (2016) stated the relevance of cultural environment as a leading cause for the Industrial Revolution. Similarly, she can be placed in continuity to Margaret Jacob, who, in her book of 1981 of the same title, coined the concept of *Radical Enlightenment* and argued that this line of thought, with its materialistic and egalitarian ideas, was the main contributor to the "making of modernity."¹⁸ To conclude on this account of her position, McCloskey's *magnum opus* is an attempt to celebrate the simple lifestyle and rigorous work ethics of the bourgeoisie, as it was memorably described by Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.¹⁹

¹⁷ McCloskey draws this comparison between herself and other historians who adopt an "ideational approach" in Deirdre McCloskey, *Bourgeois Virtues ...* cit., pp. 94-95.

¹⁸ *Philosophy and the Making of Modernity* was the subtitle of the first volume of another trilogy, yet again titled *Radical Enlightenment*, by Jonathan Israel, who in 2001 revamped Jacob's concept and applied it to the work of Spinoza. McCloskey widely discusses both Mokyr and Jacob, and in the latter case, rightfully insists on crediting Jacob as the original creator of this label (see Deirdre McCloskey, *Bourgeois Equality ...* cit., p. 694 n4).

¹⁹ Although a comparison with Weber, who is often referenced in the *Bourgeois* trilogy, seems obvious here, McCloskey sometimes distances herself from the thesis expressed in *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In fact - she claims - Weber deserves credit for his attempt to undermine the materialist assumption of original accumulation, and yet he maintains, as opposed to McCloskey, that the "spirit of capitalism" still lies in profit and greed (see Deirdre McCloskey, *The Bourgeois Virtues ...* cit., p. 412).

It is evident, so far, how McCloskey's work is weighted by a strong ideological premise, coming from an advocate of right-wing libertarianism and free market economy who conceives state intervention as a hurdle to *laissez-faire* capitalism. Her views on Marxist theory, as it will be shown next, are no less consistent with her polemic intent.

Marx(ism) vs. the Ideational Approach

In an essay titled *Economic Liberty as Anti-Flourishing: Marx and Especially His Followers*,²⁰ McCloskey argues that even though Marxism has failed in predicting the end of capitalism, the reason it nevertheless remains an official dogma among a large part of the *clerisy* lies in its politico-ideological appeal as a creed, rather than in its original intellectual significance.²¹ Such a statement is particularly meaningful coming from someone who, as she admits later on in the same article, during her formation years “progressed rapidly through left anarchism and Trotskyism and left Democrat and social engineering, and then more slowly by the decades through conventional Chicago School economics to Austrian economics and at last to sisterly libertarianism and a new humanomics.”²² In fact, McCloskey devotes the core of the second volume of the trilogy to criticize Marx's theory of accumulation as a perfect example of what she calls a “Materialist Postulate”.

“Under the Materialist Postulate a rhetoric *never* changes independent of economics or demography [...]. Any noneconomic and merely rhetorical change is always to be derived from the economic/demographic sphere, where we have hard if dubious numbers and marxoid if erroneous theories. Intellectual production changes its character in proportion as material production is changed.”²³

²⁰ Deirdre McCloskey, *Economic Liberty as Anti-Flourishing: Marx and Especially His Followers*, available online on aei.org.

²¹ In her words, see *Ibidem*: “Yet I enrage my friends on the right by stating the obvious, that Marx was the greatest social scientist of the 19th century, without comparison. But then I enrage my friends on the left by adding, which is my point here, that he was nonetheless mistaken on almost every point of economics and of history. Which is why I haven't got any friends. That second enraging fact is what we need to understand, for its present use. In their persistence in scientific error the followers of Marx are more interesting than the man himself, who after all tried hard to use his amazing intellect to see to the bottom of what was then known of economics and of history. It was to be expected, considering the state then of economics and of history, that he would get many points wrong”.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ Deirdre McCloskey, *Bourgeois Dignity ... cit.*, p. 270. What follows is an interesting quote by Antonio Gramsci criticizing such a materialist approach (her source however is not a direct reading of the *Prison Notebooks*, but a collection of essays by Michael Walzer

McCloskey's critique of Marx follows two main issues: original accumulation and historical materialism. Against the theory of original accumulation, which marked the birth of capitalism, McCloskey notes that capitalism and greed do not necessarily go hand in hand²⁴; and against historical materialism, she claims that "*Prudence Only* theories [that is, theories which only take economic factors into account], whether taken individually or together, can't explain the startling rise of real incomes from 1700 to the present, thousands of percents. Rhetoric perhaps can".²⁵ A reference to rhetoric²⁶ is not coincidental since McCloskey's approach, as expressed in her 1983 book *The Rhetoric of Economics*, criticizes scientism in the same sense as Friedrich von Hayek does in *The Counter-revolution of Science* (1952).²⁷ The idea that every field of human knowledge – including history of economics – needs to be colonized by science and its methodology should be rejected on the basis that the mainstream approach ultimately relies on mathematics and statistics as rhetorical instruments of persuasion – *metaphors*, she claims –, in order to appeal to their audiences. Against the idea that economic structures are

titled *The Company of Critics. Social Criticism And Political Commitment In The Twentieth Century*, New York, Basic Books, 1988).

²⁴ On the topic, see also Deirdre McCloskey, *Bourgeois Dignity ...* cit., pp. 140-143.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

²⁶ McCloskey defines rhetoric as that of "Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian among the ancients, reincarnated in the Renaissance, crucified by the Cartesian dogma that only the indubitable is true; which in the third century after Descartes rose from the dead. The faith built on these miracles is known in literary studies as the New Rhetoric, new in the 1930s and 1940s from the hands of I. A. Richards in Britain and Kenneth Burke in America. In philosophy John Dewey and Ludwig Wittgenstein had already begun to criticize Descartes' program of erecting belief on a foundation of skepticism. More recently Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, and Imre Lakatos among others have undermined the positivist supposition that scientific progress does in fact follow Descartes' doubting rules of method. The literary, epistemological, and methodological strands have not yet wound into one cord, but they belong together". Deirdre McCloskey, "The Rhetoric of Economics", *Journal of Economic Literature*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1983, pp. 481-517.

²⁷ In the words of Hayek: "It need scarcely be emphasized that nothing we shall have to say is aimed against the methods of Science in their proper sphere or is intended to throw the slightest doubt on their value. But to preclude any misunderstanding on this point we shall, wherever we are concerned, not with the general spirit of disinterested inquiry but with slavish imitation of the method and language of Science, speak of "scientism" or the "scientistic" prejudice. [...] It should be noted that, in the sense in which we shall use these terms, they describe, of course, an attitude which is decidedly unscientific in the true sense of the word, since it involves a mechanical and uncritical application of habits of thought to fields different from those in which they have been formed. The scientistic as distinguished from the scientific view is not an unprejudiced but a very prejudiced approach which, before it has considered its subject, claims to know what the most appropriate way is of investigating it". Friedrich August von Hayek, *The Counter-revolution of Science. A Critique on the Abuse of Reason*, London, Collier-Macmillan, 1955, pp. 15-16.

the catalysts of change in ideology, her target is not just Marx himself, but the entire Marxist line of thought as well, which contributed to an extremization of this approach. On the contrary, McCloskey's take focuses on socio-cultural and political aspects of historical change – especially considering the role of the bourgeoisie in the birth of capitalism: these aspects are difficult to frame with statistical instruments, but that does not mean they are less relevant.²⁸

However, sometimes McCloskey seems to look at her own sources with a strong ideological premise which prevents her to see that her opponents' theories on historical change are more complex than she seems to believe. About a far too easy interpretation of historical materialism, Joseph Schumpeter – who, it is safe to say, was no Marxist – comments:

“The economic interpretation of history does not mean that men are, consciously or unconsciously, wholly or primarily, actuated by economic motives. On the contrary, the explanation of the role and mechanism of non-economic motives and the analysis of the way in which social reality mirrors itself in the individual psyches is an essential element of the [Marxist] theory and one of its most significant contributions. Marx did not hold that religions, metaphysics, schools of art, ethical ideas and political volitions were either reducible to economic *motives* or of no importance. He only tried to unveil the economic *conditions* which shape them and which account for their rise and fall.”²⁹

Despite McCloskey's idea of historical materialism, Schumpeter is showing that Marx's philosophy of history is not all about economic motives, and even though ideas, culture, morality and ideology are not the prime movers of social and political change, “neither were they mere smoke”, as he comments in the same passage.

And rightly so. McCloskey almost exclusively quotes Marx from *The Capital*, therefore missing on some nuances of his theory, as expressed, for example, in the *Grundrisse*. She intends to criticise Marx's theory on the birth of capitalism because she refuses to accept the idea that “capital comes [into the world] dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt.”³⁰ The

²⁸ On the same topic, her thesis should be compared to that of Robert Heilbroner, who McCloskey quotes from time to time despite their divergent political opinions. He wrote a textbook which became a bestseller and was often read in US colleges starting from the end of the 1950s: *The Worldly Philosophers. The Lives, Times And Ideas Of The Great Economic Thinkers*, New York, Touchstone, 1999, 1st ed. 1953. In this book, aside from providing his own account on the history of economic thought, he seems to share the same intolerance for scientism in economics as McCloskey. In fact, in the final chapter – added to the 1999 edition and titled *The End of the Worldly Philosophy?* – Heilbroner subtly shows how the mainstream, mathematical approach is not the only rigorous one in economic studies.

²⁹ Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, translated by T. K. McCraw, New York, Harper Collins, 2008, 1st ed. 1942, pp. 10-11.

³⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital*, edited by F. Engels, in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Chicago-London-Toronto, William Benton publisher, 1952.

theory of original accumulation does not disregard the power of human expertise in terms of scientific breakthroughs, and contemplates the idea that accumulation of money alone is not enough to kickstart the capitalist revolution:

“*Money wealth neither invented nor fabricated the spinning wheel and the loom. But, once unbound from their land and soil, spinner and weaver with their stools and wheels came under the command of money wealth. Capital proper does nothing but bring together the mass of hands and instruments which it finds on hand. It agglomerates them under its command. That is its real stockpiling; the stockpiling of workers, along with their instruments, at particular points.*”³¹

According to Marx, original accumulation marked the transformation from a feudalistic mode of production to a capitalist one: in the evolution of society, technological improvements led to increased production with consequent greater trade opportunities, commodity production, and private property, which furthered the division of society into rich and poor, workers and capitalists – in Marxist terms, that indicates the historical separation of the producer from the means of production.³² However, this separation was not kickstarted solely by economic motives. Another passage from the *Grundrisse* further clarifies the issue:

“Nature builds no machines, no locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, self-acting mules etc. These are products of human industry; natural material transformed into organs of the human will over nature, or of human participation in nature. They are organs of the human brain, created by the human hand; the power of knowledge, objectified. The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a direct force of production, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it. To what degree the powers of social production have been produced, not only in the form of knowledge, but also as immediate organs of social practice, of the real-life process.”³³

³¹ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, translated by M. Nicolaus, London, Penguin Classics, 1973, p. 507 (emphasis mine).

³² That is not to say that original accumulation is a perfectly resolved issue in Marxist theory. In 1952, on the American review *Science and Society*, Paul Sweezy’s critical review of Maurice Dobb’s *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* started a debate on the transition from feudalism to capitalism, which went on to involve other historians. Here is the basis of this disagreement: Sweezy, following Henri Pirenne, maintained that the transition from feudalism to capitalism was caused by a switch from “natural economy” to “exchange economy”, while Dobb claimed that this transition was more of a single, long-term, gradual process, originated from the intrinsic contradictions of the feudalistic system. See Guido Bolaffi, *La transizione dal feudalesimo al capitalismo*, Roma, Savelli Editore, 1973.

³³ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* ... cit., p. 706.

In this passage, which concludes a section of the *Grundrisse* on the role of machines in extracting surplus value from labour and its effects on work time, Marx does not disregard “the power of knowledge” in the development of the capital (it is this passage, after all, that originated the research hypothesis of a “cognitive-cultural capitalism”³⁴). Ultimately, financial capital itself is not a “thing”, but a social relation between people, a way to extract profit from monetary resources, that is, an element of the relations of productions, and its development has shown how social knowledge has become a productive force in itself. Marx’s words about the general intellect show how it is possible to give an account of the theory of accumulation that transcends the technological and “material” aspects of a mode of production by also acknowledging the transformation of society in a broader sense: even the most advanced technology cannot be activated for production without the necessary “know-how”, to use a contemporary idiom, and it is that knowledge that constitutes the *general intellect*.

This is not to say that this is what McCloskey would call an “ideational” approach to social change, although it shows that historical materialism is not just about the “material” aspects of the capital. Also, it would not be true to say that historical materialism and original accumulation are not based *at all* on an emphasis on economic structures and factors applied to historical changes – after all, Marx did write himself that “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness.”³⁵ However, the fact that McCloskey misses out on Marx’s ideas regarding the *general intellect* needs to be taken into account, as the “physical accumulation” that Marxists allegedly “became obsessed with”³⁶ is not just physical, in a materialistic, monetary sense, but it is also a matter of knowledge and its social dimensions.

A “Single Bullet” Theory of Change

McCloskey’s polemic intent is so strong and so fundamental to her argument, that it prevents her from seeing its own theoretical fallacies. In fact, her theory of change, based on the insistence on a shift in rhetoric that originated the Industrial Revolution, might well be a case of causal monism. David Harvey, in his latest book, eloquently titled *Marx, Capital, and the Madness of Economic Reason*, briefly mentions what he calls “single-bullet

³⁴ For a summary of the concept, see Antonio Negri, Carlo Vercellone, “Il rapporto capitale/lavoro nel capitalismo cognitivo”, *Posse*, Ottobre 2007, pp.46-56.

³⁵ Karl Marx, Selections from the preface to *A Contribution to the Criticism of Political Economy*, cited in Deirdre McCloskey, *Bourgeois Dignity ... cit.*, p. 268.

³⁶ Deirdre McCloskey, *Bourgeois Dignity ... cit.*, p. 157.

theories of change”³⁷, that is, theories which only admit a single factor as the only prime mover of historical change, in politics, economics and society. According to Harvey, some schools of thought in social sciences – such as technological, environmental, cultural or class struggle determinists – adopt “single-bullet theories” as explanations for social and political change, and they draw their argument from Marxist theory as a justification for their approach. However, Harvey says, interpreting Marx’s work as an example of causal monism would be a mistake – even though he admits that both his critics and his supporters have been guilty of such “single-bullet” interpretations of Marx. In the aforementioned essay, Harvey proposes a new reading of the Marxist canon. He outlines seven different factors which mark historical change: despite being frayed by tensions and contradictions, these factors are still co-dependent and co-evolve in relation to each other within the totality of capitalism. The seven factors are: technological and organizational forms of production, relations to nature, social relations, mental conceptions of the world, labour processes and production, institutional, legal and governmental arrangements, the conduct of daily life and the activities of social reproduction.³⁸ In Harvey’s reading of Marx, it is the dialectical exchange among these factors that indicate historical change in society, politics, economy, technology – *pace* McCloskey, this also means, for example, that even new technologies cannot be applied and made productive without new mental conceptions of the world. McCloskey, on the other hand, given her strong ideological premise, wants to solve the historical conundrum by cutting through the complexity of the Industrial Revolution with a single solution – that is, the “revolution of ideas”, the shift in the rhetoric of money and moneymaking, that made the “Great Enrichment” effectively productive.

It should be clarified, however, that McCloskey’s argument is original and valuable under many respects, since it cuts across a mainstream approach in economic history, despite it being part of her own background during her formation years. Moreover, by casting light on often dismissed sources in economic history and drawing her arguments from literature and moral philosophy,³⁹ she acknowledges the importance of change in culture and ideas

³⁷ David Harvey, *Marx e la follia del capitale*, trad. di V. B. Sala, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2018, p. 118-119.

³⁸ David Harvey, *Marx e la follia del capitale ... cit.*, pp. 120-121.

³⁹ This is especially evident in Part III of *Bourgeois Equality*, where, after criticizing the theory of accumulation, in response to the question “What then, explains the enrichment?”, she refers to Adam Smith and Jane Austen, therefore drawing her argument from moral philosophy and literature. Her take on Austen is especially interesting, and relevant for a new perspective on history of female authorship: on the basis of an analysis of Austen’s novels, McCloskey argues that “Smith from the liberal side and Austen from the conservative side both worried about sense *and* sensibility”. This, according to the McCloskey’s humanistic ethics, is the perfect model of good bourgeoisness, one which

which might have been disregarded in other studies within the same research field.⁴⁰ On a side note, it should be mentioned that McCloskey's account is neither the first nor the only one who contributes to an ideational account of the Industrial Revolution. Joel Mokyr, for example, who is often referenced by McCloskey herself on this topic, has coined the concept of "Industrial Enlightenment", which aims to focus on the philosophical ideas which supported technological innovation – namely, but not exclusively, Bacon's philosophy of nature:

“Interestingly enough, Bacon has been heavily criticized by some early and modern critics of industrial society. It is ironic, one scholar remarks wryly, that those who were born late enough to have benefited the most from advances inspired by Bacon's insights have heaped the most scorn on his ‘disastrously mistaken belief that nature and the creation are ordained for man's benefit and rule’. It is even more striking that economic historians who regard the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent process of economic growth as a watershed in economic history have never given the Baconian program much credit for this development. Bacon and his followers planted the seeds of what is now known as the Industrial Enlightenment, and it is hard to think about the Industrial Revolution without considering the preceding cultural developments that made it possible.”⁴¹

Just as Mokyr, in this passage, argues that Bacon's ideas on human control over nature were the catalyst for technological advancement, McCloskey does with her bourgeois ethics, which is, along with the gender nuance she adds to her moral theory, where her originality lies. In a sense, she

combines prudence and rationality with love and justice. See Deirdre McCloskey, *Bourgeois Equality* ... cit., p. 169.

⁴⁰ For example, in Deirdre McCloskey, *Bourgeois Equality* ... cit., pp. 509-510, where she criticizes one of the most impactful accounts on the Industrial Revolution, as expressed by David Landes in his seminal text *The Unbound Prometheus*: “The historian David Landes asserted in 1999 that ‘if we learn anything from the history of economic development, is that culture makes all the difference (Here Max Weber was right on)’. He is mistaken if ‘culture’ here means, as Landes did intend it to mean, historically deep national characteristics. We learn instead that superficial rhetoric makes all the difference, potentially refigured in any generation that cares to do so. [...] Culture is not much to the point, it would seem – unless indeed, ‘culture’ is understood as ‘the rhetoric people presently find persuasive’. In which case, yes, right on”. It can be argued that the issue of “culture” is not the only reason of dispute between Landes and McCloskey. As it can be inferred by her critique of the original accumulation, McCloskey is opposed to the idea that greed and profit is essential to the ‘Great Enrichment’. On the contrary, it is clear from its title that for Landes, technological advancement is also a matter of *hybris*, with both its good and evil, “and there have been moments when the evil has far outweighed the good”. See David S. Landes, *The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969, p. 555.

⁴¹ Joel Mokyr, *A Culture of Growth* ... cit., p. 78.

provides an apologia of capitalism⁴² while still being aware that ethics are at stake.⁴³ She succeeds in showing how a shift in rhetoric can be relevant to the birth of capitalism – without necessarily or exclusively appealing to Weber – but that does not mean, as she would like, that a change in rhetoric would be the single, direct cause with enough explanatory power to make sense of the Industrial Revolution as a whole. In fact, it seems that her “single-bullet” theory of change entails a strict causal determinism, since the shift in rhetoric was not only necessary, but also sufficient for the “Great Enrichment.”⁴⁴

Her story of origins is an interesting one, given her intellectual profile, her background, the sources she uses and her polemic intent towards the mainstream scholarship, and still, from a logical point of view, it raises the question: if a shift in ideas caused the Industrial Revolution, what caused the shift in ideas itself? It is clear from the previous passage that she is not simply looking for conditions or enablers of the Industrial Revolution. Rather, she is looking for that single factor which will serve her polemic intent towards material historicism. However, the fact that she points out a condition both necessary and sufficient, namely the change in rhetoric, as she makes a direct inference between this change and the Industrial Revolution, cannot be reconciled with the acknowledgement of a plurality of causes for a single effect, therefore stripping historical change of its complexity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, what can be inferred about historical change from Deirdre McCloskey’s *Bourgeois* trilogy and its possible criticism? I hope to have shown here the dangers of seeking a prime mover of historical change, and why a complex and multi-causal perspective on pivotal historical events is preferable to seeking a single cause explanation. McCloskey’s fallacy lies in the danger of replacing the “original accumulation” of the Marxist tradition with another all-purpose label, which is no less unsatisfying: regressing in a chain of causation in an attempt to find a single, direct cause of social and political change, McCloskey’s solution might well be subjected to an infinite regress. Yet

⁴² By her own admission, see above n15.

⁴³ “Capitalism has retained its creativity; and yet it has not abandoned ethics. I think a worse ‘tragedy’, in the sense of an ‘exceptionally bad turn, avoidable if we had been less proud’, would be to accept the pessimistic view and abandon the daily task of moralizing capitalism”. Deirdre McCloskey, *Bourgeois Virtues* ... cit., p. 13.

⁴⁴ “The stronger claim that I have made, harder to demonstrate, tells a story of origins, a sufficiency as against a merely long-run necessity assigned to bourgeois rhetoric in making and keeping the modern world”. Deirdre McCloskey, *Bourgeois Equality* ... cit., p. 418.

she is so engaged in outlining the relevance of the pivotal role of the bourgeoisie in cultural change, that she gives no backstory for it, resulting in an historical account which is torn between the “before” and the “after”. There are no gradual transitions and no plurality of conditions, just a single, linear, progressive chain of event, until the historical wedge that originated an extraordinary outcome. While it is true that McCloskey gives plenty of explanations to why the Great Enrichment really is extraordinary, and there is good reason to believe her, there is no reason why there should be a single, direct cause behind it. On the other hand, a theory of change that entails a single factor that causes a ground-breaking outcome, especially when applied to history, presents two challenges: one towards the past and one towards the future. The first one, towards the past, as mentioned before, the progressive chain of events that she claims has started with the shift in rhetoric can potentially go back *ad infinitum*, in search of a prime mover. The second one, towards the future, because this process of the *making of modernity* is regarded as strictly progressive in a blindly optimistic sense, without any awareness of the challenges and tensions it presents, claiming, for example, that, despite the vices of the bourgeoisie, anti-bourgeois rhetoric “made an impossible Best into the enemy of an actual Good”.⁴⁵

It is as “anti-bourgeois rhetoric” that she dismisses the concerns of many other scholars, taking one step away from a more comprehensive and all-encompassing account of the Industrial Revolution, as well as removing from the picture all the tensions and conflicts of contemporary capitalist society.⁴⁶ In fact, McCloskey’s account is motivated by her polemic intent against Marxism, as shown by her intellectual premise. Because of this, she ignores any alternative reading of historical materialism, which brings about a few fallacies in her theory of change. McCloskey’s position is valuable and innovative in every other aspect but her strict causal monism. In fact, it is risky, for all the reasons shown so far, to rely on a theory that seeks a prime mover for historical

⁴⁵ Deirdre McCloskey, *Bourgeois Virtues* ... cit., p. 2 (see also the denial of environmental challenges, *Ibidem*, p. 17). Moreover, the second volume of the trilogy ends on the theme of optimism: see Deirdre McCloskey, *Bourgeois Dignity* ... cit., p. 439.

⁴⁶ See Deirdre McCloskey, *Bourgeois Equality* ... cit., p. 540 for a list of a few scholars who were concerned with the “cultural contradictions of capitalism”: Daniel Bell, Karl Polanyi, Joseph Schumpeter, Karl Marx, Max Weber and Lenin. Among them, Daniel Bell was particularly concerned with the cultural contradictions of capitalism to the point where he titled a book after the topic. He had a concept of culture – as “narrative” – remarkably similar to that of McCloskey. In his words: “I use the term culture—as is evident in this book—to mean less than the anthropological catchall which defines any ‘patterned way of life’ as a culture, and more than the aristocratic tradition which restricts culture to refinement and to the high arts. Culture, for me, is the effort to provide a coherent set of answers to the existential predicaments that confront all human beings in the passage of their lives”. Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, New York, Basic Books, 1978, p. XV.

change, because it entails a linear conception of history rather than a more complex and comprehensive one. There is no “single bullet” that explains the evolution of every society: on the contrary, social and political change is an adaptive and complex process that depends on a plurality of factors, and a theory of change that relies on casual monism – regardless of it being based either on “material” or “ideational” factors – cannot give account of such complexity.